

A Question of Taste? The Difference in Perceived Helpfulness of Online Reviews for Utilitarian versus Hedonic Products

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Over the last decade online reviews have become an indispensable decision tool in the online purchase environment (Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006) and, hence, many online businesses use them in their marketing strategies (Dellaroccas 2003). However, to have an influence on consumers' purchase decisions, a review presumably needs to be viewed as helpful (Zhu and Zhang 2010). Previous research has provided evidence that product characteristics can affect how consumers process a Word-of-Mouth message (e.g. review) (Sundaram and Webster 1999). The current paper focuses on the hedonic/utilitarian character of a product as influencing factor on the perceived helpfulness of a review.

Research on the difference between utilitarian and hedonic products illustrates that online Word-of-Mouth is perceived as less helpful for hedonic products than for utilitarian products (Cheema and Papatla 2010; Sen and Lerman 2007). It has been argued that this difference in perceived helpfulness can be explained by the consumers' attributions regarding the reviewers' motivation (Sen and Lerman 2007). In contrast, this paper proposes that the difference in perceived helpfulness between the two types of products can be attributed to consumers' inferences about the product quality itself.

Our prediction is based on theory related to the opinion versus taste distinction (for a review Spears, Ellemers and Doosje 2009). While opinions are views that can at least in principle be evaluated at some level for their correctness, taste is essentially an arbitrary preference, whose evaluation is in the eye of the beholder. Consequently, opinions can be related to a "correct position" and be validated by others' opinions. This may not be possible for taste, which is different among groups or people (Spears et al. 2009).

The current paper contributes to the existing literature in several respects. First, we demonstrate how consumers consider the quality of utilitarian goods to be a matter of opinion, while the quality of hedonic goods is seen as a question of taste. Second, we show how online reviews are able to help validate opinions, while not being able to validate personal taste. Third, the role of the opinion-taste distinction in mediating the effect of product type on review helpfulness is illustrated. We tested these expectations with four studies, with both online review and experimental data. In these studies we used one product category only, to avoid biases caused by category differences. Books were chosen, since they could be both hedonic (fiction) and utilitarian (non-fiction). A pretest confirmed our assumptions regarding the hedonic/utilitarian character of fiction and non-fiction books.

In study 1 we tested whether consumers find online reviews for utilitarian goods more helpful than reviews for hedonic goods. Using a within-subject design, participants were given a short

description of two fiction and two non-fiction books and were then asked to evaluate the helpfulness of five reviews for each book. The valence of the reviews and the perceived attractiveness of the books were recorded as control variables (with no significant effects). The results revealed that online reviews for utilitarian goods are perceived as more helpful than online reviews for hedonic goods.

We conducted a second study to investigate if the effect from the first study will endure in a real-life setting. Review data for 1,200 reviews were extracted for both fiction and non-fiction books from different sales ranks. In addition to the product type, we collected information about the sales rank of the product and the valence of the review. The results resemble those of the previous study, since reviews for non-fiction (versus fiction) books were perceived as more helpful. This effect, however, was moderated by the position on the sales rank. The helpfulness of reviews for utilitarian books was as low as for hedonic books in the case of top bestsellers. A high position on the bestseller list often correlates with the overall popularity of products. Being popular in itself signals a higher quality, making online reviews superfluous (Zhu and Zhang 2010).

Study 3 tested if consumers consider the quality of hedonic products as a question of taste and the quality of utilitarian products as a matter of opinion. In a within-subject design, participants had to evaluate four fiction and four non-fiction books on a 'taste versus opinion' - scale we developed using existing literature. Both a reliability and an exploratory factor analysis delivered satisfying values for the 3-item scale. Fiction books scored significantly higher on our scale than non-fiction, indicating that they were more dependent on taste.

In the fourth study we assessed if the effect of product type on the perceived helpfulness of online reviews is mediated by the consumers' attributions with regard to the opinion-taste distinction. We tested this hypothesis with a between-subjects design, involving both a hedonic (fiction books) and a utilitarian (non-fiction books) condition. After receiving a general description of the book, participants were asked to evaluate it on the taste-versus-opinion scale. Replicating the findings of study 3, the quality of the fiction book was perceived to be more dependent on personal taste than the quality of the non-fiction book. Subsequently, participants were given a negative online review and had to evaluate its helpfulness. The review for the non-fiction book was perceived as more helpful than the review for the fiction book, resembling the findings of the first two studies. Finally, the results indicate a mediation effect of the opinion-taste distinction for the difference in perceived helpfulness.

The current research provides insight into the difference in perceived helpfulness for utilitarian and hedonic products. Reviews for hedonic goods are perceived as less helpful than for utilitarian goods, because the quality of hedonic goods is more dependent on personal taste. Hence, we can confirm that the difference in helpfulness can be attributed to the product type. This paper demonstrates that reviews may not be equally effective for all types of products, even within the same category. Since online reviews are expected to influence product sales only when the review information is used by the consumers, these results may have important managerial implications for companies that use online reviews as a marketing tool.

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